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# The Classical Weekly

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## PRESCRIBED READING IN LATIN, 1923-1925

For the years 1923, 1924, 1925 the College Entrance Examination Board has fixed, as the prescribed reading in poetry, Aeneid 1 and 4, and selections from the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, as follows: 3.1-137 (Cadmus); 4.55-166 (Pyramus and Thisbe); 4.663-764 (Perseus and Andromeda); 6.165-312 (Niobe); 8.183-235 (Dae-dalus and Icarus); 10.1-77 (Orpheus and Eurydice); 11.85-145 (Midas).

In Cicero, the prescription includes the Fourth Oration Against Catiline and the Oration For the Manilian Law.

C. K.

## NATURE IN OVID

In THE CLASSICAL WEEKLY 14.49-51, 57-58, under the caption The Love of Nature in Vergil, I called attention to an important book, entitled The Love of Nature Among the Romans During the Later Decades of the Republic and the First Century of the Empire, by Sir Archibald Geikie, a well known English geologist (London, John Murray, 1912), and gave some extracts from the book, illustrating Vergil's love of the country, especially of his birthplace, and of country life. I took the opportunity which this discussion offered to consider Horace's attitude toward his birthplace, as set forth in the famous Exegi monumentum ode (3.30), and, finally, Cicero's attitude toward Arpinum. There were remarks also on the attitude which the Italian country towns maintained towards those who, after going out from them, reached fame at the capital.

Since, for this year and for two more years to come, at least, Ovid enters into the prescribed reading in Latin poetry, as fixed by the College Entrance Examination Board, it seems worth while to present here some extracts from Sir Archibald Geikie's book which deal with the place that nature has in the poetry of Ovid (pages 100-107). I think he underestimates two things: (1) Ovid's ceaseless avoidance of seriousness, especially of the appearance of serious and deep emotion, and the fact that, inevitably, in his appeals from Tomi for remission or at least mitigation of his punishment, he would exaggerate the discomforts of life at Tomi. To accept at their face value those descriptions is not the way to understand Ovid.

It is in his relation to Nature, however, that we have to consider Ovid here. Above and beyond his interest in the gallantries, frivolities, and dissipations of the fashionable circles in which he moved, he had a poet's eye for much of the beauty and charm of the outer world. Even his amatory poetry, which includes his most brilliant as well as his least pleasing work, contains phrases, lines, and longer passages which indicate

a love of Nature. In treating of the myths and legends of Greece and Italy, and the sacred and secular customs and traditions of Rome, he had a boundless field for the exercise of his peculiar gifts. Many of these tales had been told over and over again. But Ovid recognised that as they had little or no foundation in written history, it was allowable to clothe them anew in such garb as seemed to him most picturesque, acting on his own maxim, "Si poteris, vere, si minus, apte tamen"<sup>1</sup>. This dressing-up of old myths afforded him the opportunity to surround his personages with a background of natural scenery, and to paint little vignette landscapes that bring the quiet beauty of Nature into prominent relief. His favourite scene, if we may judge from the frequency with which he introduces it into his poems, seems to have been the popular combination of shady woodland and still or murmuring water<sup>2</sup>. The pictures which he draws, however, are usually of a characteristically generalised type. They seldom appeal to us as taken directly from Nature or from recollections that had deeply imprinted themselves on the poet's mind, and were recalled in their details, with something like the affection so delightfully indicated in the episodes and similes of Virgil. The various scenic features and the way in which they are grouped by Ovid suggest that they were not so much objects which he loved to think of, to allude to, and to describe, as convenient or necessary materials for the background or setting wherein he sought to place the story or legend which he desired to tell. Sometimes, indeed, it would seem that just as the grouping of the figures in one of his tales occasionally reminds us of some mythological picture or group of statuary, so these pictorial landscapes or backgrounds have a somewhat artificial or conventional character, as if suggested rather by the recollection of pictures than of scenes actually beheld and cherished in recollection. We do not seem to breathe the very air of the places, as Virgil makes us do by the light touch of a few vivid words.

Yet Ovid was gifted with a rare power of description. He could tell a tale with a brilliance of fancy, an artistic faculty in the grouping of incidents, and a skill in the choice of words such as hardly any other poet of ancient or modern times has equalled. This genius for narrative was united to an unrivalled facility in verse-making. The copious flow of his musical language rolls on from one subject to another, not only without apparent effort, but with the easy grace of a consummate master of his art. Its very perfection is apt to become monotonous, while his evident delight in the exercise of his gift of narration sometimes makes him lose the sense of proportion and overload his pictures with a detail that detracts from their breadth, and occasionally becomes tedious and irrelevant.

Ovid's art is thus always conspicuous. Nowhere is this characteristic more apparent than in the arrangement and description of the surroundings of the actors in one of his mythological legends. There is generally an umbrageous wood throwing a coolness over some spring or stream or lake. The margin of the water is bordered with soft turf which is kept green by the

<sup>1</sup>Ars Am. 1.228.

<sup>2</sup>Compare Fasti 6. 9-10 Est nemus arboribus densum, secretus ab omni voce locus, si non obstraperetur aquis.

moisture. Sometimes the individual kinds of trees are noted, or the scented shrubs or flowers. A rich gallery of such landscapes is to be found in the poems. As examples of them reference may be made to the account of the sacred spring near Hymettus<sup>3</sup>, of the spot where Narcissus first saw his reflection in the water<sup>4</sup>, of the Lake Pergus where Proserpine gathered her violets and lilies<sup>5</sup>, of the fountain of Arethusa<sup>6</sup>, of the wood in which the Calydonian boar was hunted<sup>7</sup>, of the slaying of the dragon by Cadmus<sup>8</sup>, and the Cave of Sleep<sup>9a</sup>. As an illustration, the first of these landscapes may be cited here.

"Near to Hymettus with its flowery slopes  
A sacred spring lies, bordered with soft turf,  
In the low copsewood of a shady grove.  
The arbutue overspreads the verdant sward;  
The air around is fragrant with the scents  
Of laurels, rosemary, and myrtles dark;  
Nor is the box-tree absent, with its leafage dense,  
Nor fragile tamarisk, nor cythus,  
Beneath the shadow of the garden pine.  
Stirred by the zephyrs with their balmy breath,  
The boughs above wave gently to and fro,  
The taller grasses quiver underneath".

The description of the Cave of Sleep is one of the most wonderful efforts of the imagination which has come down to us from antiquity. Its crowded incidents and the weird atmosphere in which they are involved, show the poet at the very height of his genius for description.

When it is borne in mind that Ovid was born in one of the most picturesque tracts of the whole of Italy—the rugged highlands of the Abruzzi, not far from the highest peak of the Apennines, the huge Gran Sasso d'Italia, with its snowy covering that lasts throughout most of the year, it might have been expected that the landscapes of his native district would have evoked his enthusiasm, or would, at least, have found appreciative reference in his poetry. That he was really fond of Sulmo and the region of the Peligni may be inferred from the allusions which he not infrequently makes to them. He likes to remind the world that he is "Peligni ruris alumnus". But none of these allusions evince any strong emotion. In one of his elegies, which was actually written at his earliest home, and where the local influences should have been at their strongest, there is not the least glow of affection or fervour of admiration. He speaks coldly of Sulmo as a little place, but healthy and well-watered, never parched even in the dog-days; therefore covered with soft grass, fertile in corn, and still more so in vines, and, despite its thin soil, not without the olive. So little did he find to say about this native scenery that the references to some of the features here enumerated are given more than once in the ten lines devoted to the description. And at last, as if tired of the subject, he abruptly breaks off in order to lament the absence of his lady-love, on whose behalf he wishes the mountains to sink down and the roads in the winding valleys to be smooth<sup>9</sup>.

In another poem which concludes the series of his *Amores* he again alludes to his native district. He recalls the martial fame of the Pelignian race, but is convinced that the little town, covering only a few acres of ground, will have new lustre added to it from his own poetry. He represents some future stranger addressing the place in these words: "Small though you be, since you have borne so great a poet, I will call you great". And he flatters himself that as Mantua

rejoiced in having produced Virgil, and Verona could boast of Catullus, he himself would hereafter be called the glory of the Pelignian race<sup>10</sup>. In the misery of his exile, amongst the recollections of his life which crowded his memory, the thought of that Pelignian land mingled with the visions of his other country homes and his happy domestic life therein. He recalled his gardens on the pine-clad hills where the Clodian and Flaminian roads diverge, where he used to guide the water-channels to his crops, and planted those apples which were now gathered by some stranger whom he knew not.<sup>11</sup>

Where Ovid delineates scenes that have deeply affected him, his feeling for Nature and his descriptive power are most effectively combined. Thus he has left some singularly graphic pictures of storms at sea amidst which he was himself a rueful witness of their fury. His sketches of the climate and conditions of life on the shores of the Black Sea, where he spent some ten years of piteous exile and where he finally died, are vivid representations of how that region appeared to him in his misery. They show, however, that he was led, perhaps unconsciously, to write for effect and to indulge in strong exaggeration. While every allowance is to be made for a brilliant member of a gay society, stricken with such grief as was involved in banishment to so remote a spot, it is difficult to repress a smile when we find that the poet writes of Tomi as if it lay in the Arctic regions, and speaks of hard Fate ordering him to die under the icy pole<sup>12</sup>. It is true that the temperature in the coldest part of winter falls there below the freezing-point, but so it does on the uplands of the poet's Abruzzi<sup>13</sup>. On the other hand, the summers at Tomi are as warm as in the centre of France. Ovid complains of being surrounded with naked barren plains, where neither trees nor leaves nor fruit are to be seen—places not to be approached by a man who would be happy<sup>14</sup>. His descriptions, inspired and coloured by the misery of his exile, are pitiable enough, yet although, as far as human society went, Tomi must have been a wild and savage place on the very confines of the Roman Empire, there is no reason to believe that its climate was materially different in the first century from what it is now.

C. K.

## AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS

### 1. Personal

The personal coloring in the work of Ammianus Marcellinus is in strong contrast with that in the works of Livy, of Caesar, and of Tacitus<sup>1</sup>. The last remaining book of Livy deals with events occurring a little more than a century before his birth, and these he merely recorded with an occasional reflection. Though Caesar is the chief actor in his own works, he is as coldly impersonal as if he were recording the doings of another. Save for a very few items, Tacitus was not associated with the events he records. Ammianus was not only a writer, but also a participant in historical activities, and freely gives his connection with some of the most important portions. He was an *ingenuus* (19.8.6), a *comes* with Ursicinus in the Orient (14.9.1), and, returning to Italy in 357 A.D., was one of ten tribunes and protectors sent into Gaul

<sup>3</sup>Ars Am. 3.687-694.

<sup>4</sup>Met. 3.407-412.

<sup>5</sup>Met. 5.385-395.

<sup>6</sup>Met. 5.585-595.

<sup>7</sup>Met. 8.329-342.

<sup>8</sup>Met. 3.35.

<sup>9a</sup>Met. 11.592-612.

<sup>9</sup>Amores 2.16.

<sup>10</sup>Amores 3.15.8.

<sup>11</sup>Epp. ex Ponto 1.8.41-48.

<sup>12</sup>Epp. ex Ponto 4.15.36.

<sup>13</sup>Ovid, Fasti 4.81, refers to *Sulmo gelidus*. Horace, Carm. 3.19.8, speaks of Paelignian cold as proverbial.

<sup>14</sup>Tristia 3.10.71.

<sup>1</sup>Only Books 14-31 of Ammianus's work, *Rerum Gestarum Libri*, are extant.